

# Esarhaddon, king of Assyria



Lev Tolstoy

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Esarhaddon, the Assyrian king, had conquered King Lailie's dominion; he ravaged and burned all the cities, drove the inhabitants back to his own country, slaughtered the warriors, and put King Lailie himself into a cage.

One night King Esarhaddon lay in bed thinking how he would put Lailie to death, when all at once he heard a rustling, and opening his eyes he beheld an old man with a long gray beard and gentle eyes.

- Do you wish to kill Lailie? - asked the old man.

- Yes, - the king answered, - but I cannot decide by what means to execute him.

- But you are Lailie, - the old man said.

- That is not true, - replied the king - I am I, and Lailie is Lailie.

- You and Lailie are one, - said the old man. - It only seems to you that you are not Lailie and that Lailie is not you.

- What do you mean - seems? - said the king. - Here I lie on a soft bed, surrounded by my obedient slaves, and tomorrow, as today, I shall feast with my friends; whereas Lailie sits like a bird in a cage, and tomorrow he will be squirming on a stake with his tongue hanging out till he dies, his body torn to pieces by dogs.

- You cannot destroy his life, - said the old man.

- And what of the fourteen thousand warriors I killed with whose bodies I built a hill? - asked the king. - I am alive and they are not; therefore I can destroy life.

- How do you know they are not alive?

- Because I do not see them. And, moreover, they were tortured, not I. It was bad for them, but good for me.

- This, too, seems so to you. You tortured yourself, not them.

- I do not understand, - said the king.

- Do you want to understand?

- I do.

- Come here, - said the old man, pointing to a font full of water.

Esarhaddon did as the old man bade him.

- Now, as soon as I begin to pour this water over you, - said the old man, dipping a jug into the water, - submerge your head.

As he tipped the jug over him, the king submerged his head.

No sooner was his head under water than he felt that he was no longer Esarhaddon, but someone else. And, feeling himself to be that other man, he saw himself lying on a luxurious bed beside a beautiful woman. He had never seen this woman before, but he knew she was his wife.

The woman raised herself and said to him:

- My dear husband, Lallie, you were tired by yesterday's work and have slept longer than usual, and I have watched over your rest and have not roused you. But now the princes await you in the great hall. Dress and go out to them.

And Esarhaddon, understanding from these words that he was Lallie, not only felt no surprise, but even wondered that he had not known this before. And he rose and dressed himself and went to the great hall where the princes attended him.

Bowing to the ground the princes greeted Lailie, their king, then rose, and at

his command seated themselves before him. The eldest of them began to speak, saying that it was no longer possible to bear the affronts of the wicked King Esarhaddon, and that they must wage war against him. But Lailie did not agree with them, and commanded that emissaries be sent to Esarhaddon to exhort him, and he dismissed the princes. He then appointed eminent men to act as ambassadors, carefully instructing them in what to say to Esarhaddon.

Having finished these matters, Esarhaddon, feeling himself to be Lailie, rode up into the hills to hunt wild donkeys.

The hunt was successful, the king himself killing two donkeys, and, when he returned home he feasted with his friends while watching his slave girls dance.

The following day, as was his custom, he went to court, where he was awaited by petitioners, litigants, and prisoners brought to trial, and he judged the cases brought before him. When he had finished, he again rode out to his favorite pastime, hunting. And on that day he succeeded in killing an old lioness and capturing her two cubs. After the hunt he again feasted with his friends, diverting himself with music and dancing, after which he spent the night with his beloved wife.

Thus he lived for days and weeks, while waiting for the return of the ambassadors he had sent to that King Esarhaddon whom he once had been. Only after a month had gone by did they return - and then with their noses and ears cut off.

King Esarhaddon had instructed them to tell Lailie that what had been done to his ambassadors would be done to him too, unless he immediately sent the specified tribute of silver, gold, and cypress wood, and came in person to pay homage to him.

Lailie, formerly Esarhaddon, again called the princes together and took counsel with them. With one accord they declared that instead of waiting for Esarhaddon to attack them they must go to war against him.

The king agreed, and, taking his place at the head of his army, he set out on the campaign. The march lasted seven days. Each day the king rode among his men, inspiring them to valor. On the eighth day they met Esarhaddon's army in a broad valley on the bank of a river.

Lailie's warriors fought bravely, but Lailie, formerly Esarhaddon, saw the enemy swarming down from the mountain like ants, overrunning the valley and vanquishing his army, and he sped his chariot into the midst of the battle, slashing and hewing at the enemy. But Lailie's warriors numbered hundreds, while Esarhaddon's were in the thousands. And Lailie felt that he was wounded, and that they had taken him prisoner.

He marched for nine days with the other captives, bound, and surrounded by Esarhaddon's soldiers. On the tenth day he was brought to Nineveh and put into a cage. Lailie suffered not so much from his wound and hunger as from shame and impotent rage. He felt powerless to avenge himself for all the evil he was suffering. The one thing he could do was to deprive his enemies of the joy of watching his agony, and he firmly resolved to endure courageously and without a murmur all that happened to him.

For twenty days he sat in the cage awaiting execution. He saw his relatives and friends led out to death, and heard their groans; some had their arms and legs cut off, others were flayed alive, but he showed no agitation, no pity, no fear. He saw his beloved wife bound by two eunuchs, and he realized that she was being taken to Esarhaddon as a slave. And this too he bore in silence.

At last two executioners unlocked the door of his cage, and, after tying his arms behind his back with thongs, they led him to the gory execution site. Lailie saw the sharp, bloodstained stake from which the dead body of one of his friends had just been torn, and he realized that this stake had been cleared for his own execution.

They took off his clothes. Lailie was horrified at the gauntness of his once strong and handsome body. The two executioners seized that body by its scrawny thighs, lifted it up, and were about to impale it on the stake.

"Now death, extinction," Lailie thought, and, forgetting his resolution to

remain courageously calm to the end, he sobbed and prayed for mercy. But no one listened to him. "But this cannot be! Surely I am asleep - it is a dream!" And he made an effort to rouse himself, thinking, "I am not Lailie, I am Esarhaddon."

"You are both Lailie and Esarhaddon," he heard a voice saying, and he felt that now his execution was going to begin.

He cried out, at the same instant raising his head from the font. The old man was standing over him, pouring the last drops of water from the jug onto his head.

- Oh, how terribly I have suffered! And how long! - said Esarhaddon.

- Long? - replied the old man. - You have only just dipped your head under water and raised it again. See, all the water has not yet been poured out of the jug. Do you understand?

Esarhaddon did not reply, but only looked in terror at the old man.

- Do you understand, - the old man continued, - that Lailie is you, that the warriors you put to death also were you? And not only the warriors, but the animals you hunted and slew and afterwards devoured at your feasts, they too were you. You thought life dwelt in you alone, but I have drawn aside the veil of delusion, and you have seen that in doing evil to others you have done it to yourself as well. Life is one in everything, and within yourself you manifest but a portion of this one life. And only in that portion that is within you can you make life better or worse, magnify or diminish it. You can make life better within yourself only by destroying the barriers that divide your life from that of other beings, and by regarding others as yourself and loving them. To destroy the life that dwells in others is not within your power. The life that was in those you have slain has not been destroyed: it has merely vanished from before your eyes. You thought to prolong your own life and to shorten the lives of others, but you cannot do this. For life there is neither time nor space. The life of a moment and the life of thousands of years, your life and the lives of all creatures seen and unseen, is one. To destroy life, even to alter it, is impossible, for life alone exists. All else only seems to be.

Having said this, the old man vanished.

The next morning King Esarhaddon commanded that Lailie and all the prisoners be freed and the executions stopped.

And on the following day he summoned his son, Ashurbanipal, and gave over the kingdom into his hands. He himself withdrew into the wilderness to meditate on all that he had learned. Later he went as a pilgrim through the towns and villages, preaching to the people that all life is one, and that men do evil only to themselves in desiring to do evil to others.

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